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ABSTRACT

Two aspects of the problem of native language grammar instruction, in this case English, are addressed. First, it is argued that a combination of linguistic and pedagogical factors contribute to the explanation for the apparent decline in English grammar instruction in the schools. Secondly, it is argued that effective grammar teaching should produce closely observant readers and precise writers. This goal could be achieved by making students aware that grammar provides access to meaning. This involves helping students to become more aware of what the student knows already. It is a process of making more explicit and developing and refining the student's implicit knowledge of the language. The proposal is made that grammar teaching should go beyond parsing to morphology, that is, to awareness of the grammatical form and meaning on the level of the word. This proposal is illustrated by several examples of the distinction in sense and reference that is produced by the use of the progressive tenses. In addition to making students better readers and writers, sensitivity to the varied expressive effects to be obtained from grammatical forms will foster the student's intellectual development. Through such study, the student can be led to view language as a coherent whole, rather than as a mass of individual facts. (AMH)

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Meaningful Grammar Teaching

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This article is an attempt to say something critical and something constructive about the teaching of the mother tongue, which, in my opinion, is the most important and the most difficult matter to teach. It is the most important because our whole intellectual life stems from the mother tongue so that anything else we learn by way of the intellect depends, ultimately, on it. Even mathematics must be approached by way of language. And yet, notwithstanding the fact that most educators acknowledge the importance of teaching the mother tongue, recent decades have witnessed a decline, not to say an abandoning of language teaching. One naturally seeks the causes of this decline. True, in some areas there are welcome indications of a renaissance, but the success of these attempts may well be short-lived if the factors which led to abandoning language teaching in the first place are still operant. The first part of this article will, therefore, be concerned with these factors. Only after this discussion can constructive suggestions be made.

Let it be said at the outset that I shall not try to deal with all aspects of language teaching, but only with the teaching of grammar. Furthermore, there will be no attempt to cover all the factors involved in abandoning it. Leaving aside the social, psychological, political and other such causes, I want to concentrate on a linguistic and a pedagogical factor, both of which contribute to the difficulty of teaching the mother tongue. Paradoxically, both these factors stem from the fact that teachers and pupils alike have a most intimate knowledge of the mother tongue and this before they study it in the lecture hall or the classroom. However, to make this clear, I must invite you to consider for a few moments the unique status of the grammar of the mother tongue.

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Perhaps the most effective way of making this first point is through a comparison with the teaching of a second language. The student of a second language must learn not only the paradigms of this language (the various forms, both regular and irregular, of verbs, of nouns, of adjectives, of pronouns) and the different grammatical words (prepositions, conjunctions, articles, etc.) but also how to make appropriate use of these forms in a sentence. In the study of the mother tongue, on the other hand, there is no need to do this. No English-speaking student has to learn, for example, the principal parts of the verb or the paradigm of the noun. Except, perhaps, for a few dialectal variants which the teacher may wish to bring closer to the chosen norm, his working knowledge of

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these forms is probably as good as his teacher's. Nor is any anglophone student ever taught how to use, say, the progressive form. It is simply taken for granted that he knows how to use it. In short, by the time an anglophone gets to English grammar class, he already knows, in a practical way, the morphology and syntax of English. This is the linguistic factor I mentioned.

The fact that we know our grammar before we are taught it naturally has far-reaching pedagogical consequences, and this brings us to the pedagogical factor, which, of course, has two facets. Insofar as the students are concerned, the most immediate pedagogical consequence is the risk of boredom. After all, there is nothing so dull as being taught what you know already. As a result, grammar teaching of the mother tongue is often little more than a process of identifying and naming. At least, that is the way it was when I went to school. On the level of morphology this consisted of identifying the part of speech and the part of the paradigm (e.g. *noun, singular*) manifested by each word – what is called *parsing*. On the level of syntax, it consisted of identifying the relation between words, phrases and clauses within a sentence – often called *analysis*. These two activities might involve the use of symbols, arrows, brackets, boxes, free diagrams, or simply words to depict the reality of the sentence, but whatever the technique, they amounted to identifying and naming. All this reminds one of the early phases of some introductory courses in biology or chemistry, where one has to learn to manipulate a certain terminology. Unfortunately, in many a classroom parsing and analysis never got beyond the naming phase. The concepts involved were never put to use and the names remained mere labels. In such cases, grammar teaching was little more than an academic activity which never really came into contact with the student's feeling for his language. Is there any wonder that it has been gradually abandoned?

What has gone wrong here? To understand why grammar teaching has ended in a *cul de sac*, and in order to prevent it doing the same thing again, we must turn our attention to the other facet of the pedagogical factor: the teacher. Perhaps the best way to make the point here is to consider that other subjects like history, physics, literature or a foreign language can be studied throughout high school and college, and even to the end of a university degree. In fact this is how most teachers of these subjects are prepared. How about English grammar? In my day, it was taught no further than grade 9 or 10, and today probably not that far. And whoever heard of anyone doing a degree in English grammar? But how, then, are teachers of English grammar prepared? This last question is not rhetorical. As far as I can see, the answer, incredible though it may

seem, is as follows: teachers of English grammar are prepared by having them study either a foreign language or English literature. Granted the incongruity of this situation, we can begin to understand why grammar is taught no further than, say, grade 9. For one reason, by that time the teacher has generally taught all he knows about it.

Someone may wish to raise an objection at this point to the effect that I am exaggerating, that students at university *do* study English grammar in linguistics courses and can even specialize in linguistics. This, of course, is quite true. Within the last couple of decades most universities, in Canada at any rate, have instituted courses and even programmes in linguistics. However a recent survey throughout the country reveals that only about 5 % of these courses deal specifically with English, and of these, about half are concerned with the phonetics, the phonology, the dialectology, the lexicology or history of English. Even courses on the theory of English grammar are often concerned primarily with theory and only incidentally with grammar.

The point I am trying to make here is not that linguistics programmes are poorly conceived, but that, in this country at least, they are conceived for ends other than that of preparing future teachers of English grammar. Although one cannot justly criticize programmes of study for not doing what they were not intended to do, one can, I think, reproach the discipline of linguistics itself with having contributed very little to what should be its most important field of application. Why has linguistics had so little to offer to grammar teaching? Is it because linguists attach little importance to the teaching of the mother tongue? Or is it that linguists have as yet nothing to contribute? The question cannot be pursued any further here. Suffice it to say that if grammar has been badly taught, or not taught, one of the reasons is that English teachers do not know enough about it. In fact, outside of the terminology, they often know little more about grammar than the students they are teaching.

Another objection might be made to my contention that lack of preparation is responsible in large part for inadequate grammar teaching. The objection is this: that it is misleading to compare grammar with physics or history or even literature because these are taught as disciplines, or at least as fields which have a certain educational value in themselves; grammar, on the other hand, is taught merely as a means to acquiring a skill, namely, greater competence in the use of our mother tongue, and particularly in written expression. There is, therefore, no need to carry the study of grammar any further than, say, grade 9 because the aim is not to form grammarians.

Let us accept for the moment the point of view involved in this objection – that grammar is nothing but a means to a practical end – though I shall return to it later on to enlarge on it and suggest that grammar can also foster intellectual development, like any other discipline. Even from this limited point of view, the three points I have been trying to make serve to emphasize the incongruity of the situation:

1) I have been suggesting that grammar often remains an academic subject which helps to identify words, but not use them better. If grammar is supposed to be a practical subject, why is it not put into practice?
2) I have also been mentioning that grammar is rarely taught beyond the ninth year of school. If it really is a means to a specific end – better written expression – why is it abandoned before this end is attained?
3) I have been pointing out that grammar teachers do little or no specialized studying in their subject. If grammar, like other subjects such as physical education or typing, is taught as a means, why should grammar teachers not be as specialized as other teachers?

So far then it has been argued that a combination of linguistic and pedagogical factors goes a long way toward explaining why grammar teaching is so difficult and why some educators, confronted with many fruitless classes, have thought it best to abandon this teaching, either partially or wholly. I can understand their attitude, though I disagree with it.

Up to this point the discussion has been aimed at finding out why grammar teaching has declined and so has been largely critical. However I do not wish to leave the impression that the picture is completely black. On the contrary, there has been much good grammar teaching, and to convince you of it I should like to quote some passages from a stimulating article on English teaching by F.E.L. PRIESTLEY[1]. The author has been describing the time when English was separated into literature, composition and grammar, and goes on to indicate how this arrangement was gradually destroyed.

> The first breach in this triple pattern came while I was still teaching school, and occasioned one of the savage quarrels I often had with inspectors. As I have said, the grammar textbooks were very bad, and many teachers followed them me-

1 «English: an Obsolete Industry?» in *In the Name of Language!* ed. J. GOLD, Macmillan of Canada, 1975.

> chanically, turning grammar into the dull set of mechanical rules that gave the subject a bad name. It is one of the fundamental principles of Canadian educational systems that if a subject is being badly taught, the simple remedy is to abolish the subject. Then no-one can complain that it is badly taught. So grammar was first drastically reduced. I had at that time a grade ten class that was fascinated by grammar, by parsing and analysis, so that we played a regular game in which I would concoct sentences of increasing subtlety for them to parse, and they would unravel them all triumphantly. The inspector caught us at it and forbade it. I must not give them problems like that, it was too hard for them. But they were all doing them successfully. No matter, they were not to do it. They were actually at the stage where they could have read Milton's prose not merely with ease but with delight at its architecture, but Authority would have none of it. Of course I ignored him, but not all teachers would or could, and soon grammar virtually faded out of the curriculum.

He then goes on to describe how, before grammar disappeared, it was restricted to «the inculcation of 'correct' usage» by means of learning 'rules». This contrasts strikingly with what he aimed at in his grammar classes: «to get students interested in the structure of the language, excited by its potentialities, and fascinated by the way in which it worked». According to this dean of English teachers in Canada:

> The two important things about that class were that they learned through grammar the relation between structure and meaning, and became closely observant readers and flexible and precise writers, and that they got great enjoyment out of it as a game. It seemed to me, and still seems, a great pity to discourage so innocent and profitable a study.

Several points should be brought out here, and this will bring us to the constructive part of our discussion. First of all, these comments on teaching grammar are not the effusions of some ivory-tower pedagogue. They reflect the experience of a man who has devoted his life to teaching English and so deserve to be taken seriously. Secondly, his teaching seems to have been effective because he attained the ends generally set for grammar teaching: «closely observant readers and precise writers». Indeed, to the extent that his students «enjoyed» it, were «excited» and even «fascinated» by it, one can be confident that they were learning. In other words, grammar teaching can be both effective and enjoyable, a fact which constitutes an irrefutable answer to those who favour reducing or abandoning it. Finally, the author indicates how he achieved his goal of making students better readers and writers: «they learned through grammar the relation between structure and meaning». Since this raises the crucial point – how to make grammar teaching effective – it deserves to be examined and developed in some detail.

The key point here is that grammar provides access to meaning. It was mentioned above that often grammar teaching was merely a process of

name-sticking, of labeling, which did not impinge on the student's feeling for language. Now the student's feeling for a sentence is, in large measure, the meaning he gets from it, so that if grammar gives access to meaning then it becomes meaningful, it becomes part of the student's universe of experience. If the teacher can show his students how they accede to meaning through grammar, they will learn something about meaning, and about grammar. However, this is not learning in the sense of acquiring hitherto unknown facts; rather, it is a matter of becoming more aware of what he knows already, of making more explicit and developing and refining this implicit knowledge of his language which he already possesses when he comes to the grammar class. This revelation of the familiar, this seeing the well-known in a new light, can give rise to the sense of discovery which characterizes true learning. And the basis of this is, I repeat, the recognition that grammar involves a «relation between structure and meaning», that, consequently, when the grammatical form changes, the meaning changes. This is a far cry from those who consider grammar as merely a set of labels (or boxes or arrows or diagrams) or as a set of «rules of usage».

The difficult thing, of course, is to put a principle like this into practice. Professor Priestley gives a good example of how he did it on the syntactic level. He cites an ambiguous line from Gray,

> And all the air a solemn stillness holds.

Here, either noun phrase («all the air» or «a solemn stillness») may be subject, an ambiguity giving rise to two different meanings. The teacher's role here is to make students aware of the different structures and the resulting senses. Work of this sort plays on various syntactic relations; it rings the changes between parts of a sentence and so involves the traditional activity of analysis. Provided it always relates these changes to resulting shifts of meaning, this sort of work goes beyond traditional analysis to syntax. This is how syntactic concepts can be put to use. Here is the type of practice that can translate syntactic analysis into a greater awareness of the ligaments of a sentence, which is one prerequisite for more percipient reading and more coherent writing.

This, however, is not the only prerequisite. Just as important as an increased awareness of the relations between the words of a sentence is an increased awareness of the words themselves. Involved at this level is, first of all, the lexical meaning of a word with all its different senses, but we shall not deal with the lexical aspect here, important though it is. Rather, we shall be concerned with the grammatical meaning of a word, with its morphology. The problem here, in the domain of morphology,

is analogous to the one we have just seen in the field of syntax: how to relate grammatical form to meaning on the level of the word. We can make use of the same technique as above, ringing the changes on the word, and observing the corresponding changes in grammatical meaning, because each form of the paradigm has its own particular way of presenting the lexical meaning. Work of this sort would presuppose the traditional activity of parsing but would entail going beyond just identifying the form, in order to link it up with meaning. This involves putting morphological concepts into use. This type of practice translates parsing into a greater awareness of what a word can express in a sentence, of the meaning potentiality of its different forms. Knowing what words can do is also a necessary condition for better reading and writing.

The point here is the need to go further than merely identifying the form of a word, to go to the point of relating the form of the word to the particular meaning it evokes in the sentence under consideration. I am proposing that grammar teaching should go beyond parsing to morphology, if you will accept my use of the term «morphology» to denote both grammatical form and meaning on the level of the word. Few teachers of English grammar are familiar with this sort of work[2] because it is rarely found in grammar textbooks. Nor is it ever a concern in literature courses because, unlike syntax, morphology is never an obstacle to understanding a text, at least in Modern English. It may therefore be useful if we pause to give an example of the sort of teaching envisaged here.

I have chosen a form from the verb paradigm, the progressive form, to illustrate this proposal. Although the progressive is almost an earmark of English since it distinguishes the English verb from the verb in most other Indo-European languages, English teachers by and large are barely aware of its existence. And quite understandably so because the progressive, not being a form which native speakers use «incorrectly», is not treated in classes for «inculcating 'correct' usage». Yet the progressive is one of the richest forms in the language for subtle distinctions of sense. There is a practically inexhaustible mine of expressive nuances to be exploited here and brought to the awareness of students. One useful technique for bringing out the way the progressive form presents the lexical meaning of the verb is to contrast it with the corresponding simple form, starting with easily discerned distinctions of sense and gradually bringing in more and more subtle distinctions.

2 The situation may well be different in the teaching of other languages. For example, the traditional *explication de texte* in French schools does involve some work in morphology. In this respect, one cannot help wondering if different ways of teaching the mother tongue have not influenced language attitudes of the two linguistic groups.

To make this clear, let us consider some particular examples. Most students would have little trouble distinguishing between the different senses of the two forms in the past tense in sentences like the following:

At midnight we were eating a sandwich.
At midnight we ate a sandwich.

Where the progressive evokes some mid-point of the action of eating, the simple form evokes the whole action, beginning, middle and end. A similar distinction of sense, but with future reference, can be observed in the following sentences:

When you come in, I'll be making a speech.
When you come in, I'll make a speech.

The progressive evokes some moment in the middle of the event, whereas the simple form evokes the whole of the event. The distinction of sense between the next two examples is quite striking because of the ludicrous effect arising from the simple form:

I was dying to tell him.
* I died to tell him.

As long as the dying is presented as not reaching its term, the example makes sense.

Different nuances on the level of discourse are obtained when reference is to the present. Thus between progressive and simple forms in a pair like:

He is driving a station wagon.
He drives a station wagon.

there is the distinction between an activity going on at the moment of speaking and an habitual activity. Again in:

He is speaking English.

one evokes a present activity, but in:

He speaks English.

the most likely interpretation is the sense of 'capacity': he knows how to speak English.

These examples are typical of the more easily observed expressive effects provided by the two verb forms. Once students can readily discern

such differences and describe them adequately they can be introduced to slightly more subtle uses. For example, in a hockey broadcast the difference between

They are changing players as the play goes on.
They change players as the play goes on.

is like that already observed in the past tense: the progressive catches the action at some mid-point, whereas the simple form presents the whole action from beginning to end. Sports broadcasts offer numerous examples of this sort of distinction.

The nuance between the sentences in the next pair is readily felt but not easily described:

Look, it is floating!
Look, it floats!

Where the progressive merely evokes the present activity of the subject, the simple form evokes more a property inherent in the object. Thus we might use the sentence with the simple form when merely reading a description of the object whereas the one with the progressive evokes the actual floating.

Different again is the nuance separating the following pair:

I am hoping to finish my term paper this week.
I hope to finish my term paper this week.

Here it is a matter of how confident the speaker feels: the simple form suggests assurance as compared with the more tentative note of the progressive.

Space does not permit us to comment on other examples but a few can be simply listed to illustrate these and other nuances:

He is driving a bus for a living.
He drives a bus for a living.

You are being very clever.
You are very clever.

Things were beginning to change.
Things began to change.

I am seeing stars.
I see stars.

In some cases, the difference of nuance between the two forms is barely perceptible and so is particularly difficult to isolate and to describe. Typical of these more difficult cases are the following:

How are you liking it in Montreal?
How do you like it in Montreal?

Are you feeling better?
Do you feel better?

I'll be seeing you tomorrow
I'll see you tomorrow.

These examples can be left to the reader's own consideration, particularly in view of the fact that I have already commented on them elsewhere[3].

These examples give some idea of the range and subtlety of nuance found in everyday speech. Once the student has been awakened to such expressive effects, he can be introduced to some less familiar ones found in literary works. Thus, to take another example from the same poet, the effect of the simple form in a line like:

> The ploughman homeward plods his weary way

harmonizes with the atmosphere of the poem. Although it depicts the present activity of the subject, it does so in such a way as to evoke the accomplishment of the action as assured and so adds to the solemnity of the scene. The progressive here would have a jarring effect. A somewhat similar effect is obtained by Conrad through his use of the simple form *sleeps* in the following sentence:

> . . . and may the deep sea where he sleeps now rock him gently, rock him tenderly to the end of time.

Students who are aware of the nuance here (as opposed to that of *is sleeping*) are more observant readers. That is to say, a knowledge of the morphological means an author uses can be of considerable help in appreciating the literary value of a text.

Awakening students to expressive effects like these cannot help but make them more sensitive readers. Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that their own writing will benefit from a greater awareness of the means of expression made available to them by the English language. Important though these practical ends are, however, they are not the only educational benefit to be obtained from the teaching of grammar. A further possible end has already been mentioned, namely, the fostering of intellectual development, and I should like to say a word about that at this point.

3 *The Simple and Progressive Forms*, Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 1975, pp. 78, 79, 109.

By making a student more and more aware of the numerous and varied expressive effects to be obtained from grammatical forms like the simple and progressive, the grammar teacher can develop his capacity to observe language use and give him a greater knowledge of individual facts, of the particular. For the student to derive what may be considered a properly intellectual benefit from his knowledge of particular facts he must, here as in other disciplines, be led to generalize on the basis of what he has observed. He must learn to see particular facts as dependent on more general facts since the capacity for sound generalization is so important in our intellectual life. It has even been said that the whole power of man's intellect is bound up with this ability to generalize. The study of grammar can help develop this capacity provided it proceeds like other disciplines in showing students how to integrate individual facts into a greater whole, to relate observed data to an underlying principle. This means that in more advanced classes (I will not venture to speculate on what level this might be) students are shown how the various senses of a form like the progressive, observed in numerous sentences, all arise from the single, underlying meaning potential of the form. (I have already established elsewhere[4] that the potential meaning of the progressive is an impression of incompletude, as opposed to one of completude underlying the simple form.) That is to say, the expressive effects mentioned above – 'catching an action at some mid-point', 'present activity', 'something temporary', 'tentative attitude' – and many others are all shown to be consequences of combining an impression of an incomplete event with a verb's particular lexical meaning and situating it all in a particular context. In this way, the student can be led to view language as a coherent whole, as a system, rather than as a mass of individual facts.

There are, of course, many other questions of usage that can be exploited in the way just suggested for the progressive. For example the use of the so-called perfect forms of the verb provides a rich field for observation of different senses and a challenging problem for generalization. The distinction between the *-ing* form and the infinitive, both in expressive effect and in potential meaning, is another interesting question. In the field of the noun, the question of number, surprisingly enough, provides many interesting uses (e.g. the two plurals of nouns like *people: these people and these peoples*). *Some* and *any*, *each* and *every*, the demonstratives, the articles, and many other questions can provide teaching material for a grammar course which aims at awakening students to the resources of their mother tongue and eventually to a grasp of its struc-

4 *Op. cit., passim.*

ture. There is certainly no lack of fascinating grammatical questions to arouse the native speaker's interest. There is, however, a very serious lack in our knowledge of these questions, and here I am referring, not to the students nor even to the teachers, but to the grammarians themselves (the linguists, if you prefer). Who, for example, can tell us the general distinction between *each* and *every*? For that matter, where can one find a good description of the various uses of these two words? Speaking as a grammarian, I would maintain that our knowledge of English grammar is so limited that it is by no means surprising to see grammar badly taught, or not taught at all, in the schools. I would even go so far as to suggest that the main cause of our present predicament is ignorance of grammar as a meaningful system. Consequently, any theory of grammar that fails to increase our knowledge in a way that is useful for grammar teachers leaves a great deal to be desired, at least from the point of view of its most important area of application.

In conclusion, then, what I am suggesting is that both parsing and analysis can be of value provided these activities are carried beyond mere naming and classifying into the fields of morphology and syntax respectively, where structure is related to meaning. Grammar teaching can be of practical value in making students more sensitive to the expressive effects of the forms and arrangements of words. At a more advanced level, it can be of scientific value in providing a field for the inductive-deductive operations inherent in any scientific discipline. The success of this most difficult teaching task depends in large part on the experience, tact and imagination of the teacher, but even the best of teachers must have sufficient knowledge to make grammar meaningful.

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